

Poll: U.S. Protestant senior pastors split on whether 'Islamic State' represents true Islam

by [Aamer Madhani](#)

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(RNS) More than a quarter of Americans—but nearly half of senior Protestant pastors—say the self-described Islamic State offers a true representation of Islamic society, according to a pair of new surveys by LifeWay Research.

The findings that indicate many Americans have a dim outlook on Islam come as President Obama sent a formal request to Congress on Wednesday (February 11) to authorize the use of military force to combat the Islamic State. Meanwhile, police in North Carolina tried to determine whether the shooting deaths of three Muslim students were hate-motivated.

Forty-five percent of 1,000 senior Protestant pastors surveyed say the Islamic State, also known as ISIL or ISIS, “gives a true indication of what an Islamic society looks like.” Forty-seven percent disagreed with the statement, according to LifeWay, a Nashville-based nonprofit Christian research group. LifeWay surveyed only clergy who identified themselves as the top pastoral officials in their organizations.

The pastors had a much more negative view of Islam than Americans at large. In contrast, in the second survey, 27 percent of Americans say the Islamic State reflects the true nature of Islamic society.

“People are increasingly antagonistic, and religious leaders are particularly antagonistic towards Islam, and perhaps what people are seeing nightly on TV news is driving this,” said Ed Stetzer, executive director of LifeWay Research. “They think about it and say, ‘I see this every night. I don’t want this here.’”

Stetzer said LifeWay decided to probe Americans’ and pastors’ attitudes after Obama declared in September that “ISIL is not Islamic,” part of an effort to undercut the idea that the group represents the religion.

This isn't the first study to suggest growing distrust among Americans about Islam since the rise of the Islamic State, whose militants have abducted aid workers and journalists, killed hostages, and taken control of swaths of Syria and Iraq. Last month, a poll published by the Brookings Institution in Washington found that 14 percent of Americans say the terror group has the support of a majority of Muslims around the world.

What might be most notable about the LifeWay surveys is the strikingly harder views on Islam among clergy, compared with Americans at large.

Sixty-one percent of senior pastors disagree and 30 percent agree with the statement "True Islam creates a peaceful society." Fifty percent of African-American pastors say Islam can create a peaceful society, while only 30 percent of white pastors agree with that statement. By contrast, 43 percent of the laypeople surveyed agree with the statement, and 40 percent disagree.

Other findings:

- 37 percent of Americans say they worry about Shari'a, the Islamic legal and religious code, being applied in the U.S. Older Americans, those over 45, are more likely to hold that concern than adults 18 to 44. Women (42 percent) are more likely to worry about Shariah than men are (33 percent).
- 76 percent of pastors say airstrikes against the Islamic State are needed to protect Christians in Iraq and Syria, while 13 percent disagree.

LifeWay polled 1,000 Americans and 1,000 senior Protestant pastors throughout the country as part of the surveys. Of the pastors surveyed, 724 identified themselves as evangelical; 474 consider themselves mainline. Pastors were permitted to consider themselves under both labels.

The survey of Americans has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points; the margin of error for the pastors' survey is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.